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Weinberger's Tenacity Brings Mixed Reactions

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WASHINGTON, Feb. 2 — Members of Congress did not get their first look at Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger's budget until today, but over the last two months they have seen a great deal of Mr. Weinberger himself.

In a grinding marathon of television appearances, newspaper interviews, Congressional testimony and about 70 private meetings with individual members of Congress, the Defense Secretary has laid out the case for his spending plans with a tireless intensity extraordinary for this early stage in the budget-making process.

He has deployed an arsenal of arguments, ranging from national security and arms control to budget economics and pragmatic politics, in trying to explain why the \$313.7 billion military budget is critical.

Credibility Seen Impaired

But, according to members of Congress and aides interviewed earlier this week, Mr. Weinberger has not softened their resolve to reduce the military budget as part of the overall effort to control the Federal deficit. On the contrary, some of them said, the Secretary's tenacious lobbying may have hardened Congressional attitudes and impaired his credibility.

"There is a feeling of exaggeration," said Senator Mark O. Hatfield, an Oregon Republican who is chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee. "A lot of his presentation is crying down the forces of doom. Well, we haven't met all their requests in the past, and it hasn't meant doom. How often do you cry wolf?"

Other members of Congress said the Secretary's tendency to get carried away in making his case was evident, in a small but telling way, on Thursday, when Mr. Weinberger, apparently trying to impress the Senate Foreign Relations Committee with the need to develop a defense against incoming missiles, twice asserted that the Soviet Union had shot down one of its errant cruise missiles that had strayed over Finland recently.

Clarification From Pentagon

Pentagon officials and intelligence sources later said the Secretary was mistaken and that the Soviet Union was working on a cruise missile defense system but had not yet mastered it. A Pentagon spokesman said the missile "was not shot down," and "either flew into the ground or ran out of fuel."

"Those kinds of things tend to detract from a man's credibility," said Representative Bill Nichols, an Alabama Democrat who is a member of the House Armed Services Committee and an admirer of Mr. Weinberger. "Generally, I feel the Secretary is pretty credible."

But Senator John H. Chafee of Rhode Island, a Republican who is a former Secretary of the Navy, said many senators believed Mr. Weinberger had used bogus numbers in contending that he had squeezed from the military budget as much as he prudently could.

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